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## A MEDIEVAL BATTLE PICTURE

By AMELIA DOROTHY DEFRIES

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THE greater part of the treasures in the National Gallery of London have been removed for safety to bomb-proof cellars, but I was able to get a quiet hour with one of the loveliest and most interesting battle pictures in the world. It belongs to a series of three, painted by Paolo Uccello, apparently as studies in perspective. Decoratively it is a masterpiece and its pure naïve coloring is delicious.

On a bright pink ground certain armored knights wage war in a manner which, if it seems a little comic to us today, is at the same time strikingly dignified and humane by the side of modern slaughter by machinery. Looking back from the frightful views of the carnage now day by day proceeding, the atmosphere of chivalry in this scene from the Middle Ages gives one the impression of a nobler culture than ours.

On the right hand side of the picture a fight of three to one is going on; and it is noticeable that one of the lancemen is trying to remove the plate from the armor of the single knight, and unless this is successful he is invulnerable. In the back of the helmet of one of his aggressors (him with the battle-axe) is another important safeguard; it is so made that on being hit it revolves swiftly and forms a protection hard to remove and impossible to pierce. So long as this remained on, the wearer could not lose his head by sword or axe. This picture is probably the finest record in existence of the using of 15th century armor. Every detail is put in, even the color is accurate; it is not at all the ordinary steel grey of modern painters of medieval subjects. Uccello far excelled the other Florentines in this respect: and to get his effect he painted all the armor in silver first, covering this with a coat of transparent colorings in which he showed the rust and the gleam realistically. The carefully arranged array of broken lances and cast off shields, with the tiny figure of the fallen fore-shortened knight on a plain pink floor, are all studies in perspective, for which this artist had as deep a passion as Leonardo da Vinci had for anatomy. He knew all there was to know of his subject at the time and his experiments, laughable to us today, were valuable to those who came after him; while as a colorist few surpassed him.

The black horses, painted blue because they looked blue to him, are especially interesting to us to-day. The other coloring is of the period, but even in this he had much original personal feeling . . . notably, here, in the grey and white of the pale horses, contrasting with the dark ones and with the other shades and tones in the picture. The gold is used as delicately as in any missal. The orange tree at the extreme left and the rose hedge breaking up the foreground are experiments in perspective; it is evident moreover that he did not discover how to make his background go back. He could make only two pictures on one canvas, as did his contemporaries, but his value to us lies in that he attempted more than this: for though he did not succeed in what he tried to do, he left a legacy of right endeavor which has made it possible for generations of others to carry out that which

he started. If modern art is showing a tendency to do away with perspective, it only means that nothing more can be achieved in that line: unless, following certain leaders, an attempt is made to peer down into the depths—of the sea or of the spirit!

The picture is called now "The Rout of San Remo, 1432": but it used to be known as "The Battle of St. Egidio, 1416"—the alteration was made after a paper in the "Athenæum" in 1907. The work was purchased in 1857 and came from the Lombardi-Baldi collection, but it originally belonged to the Giralaldi family. It is amusing to read in the official description that this brilliantly colored painting is "a grey-brown" picture!

Its painter was known as Uccello because he loved birds—in the same way Martinelli was called Archellino because he loved some one called Arley and thence we have our word Harlequin. But Paolo's real name was Paolo di Dono and he was born in Florence in 1397 and was brought up as a goldsmith. He was one of the assistants to Lorenzo Ghiberti in preparing the first pair of celebrated gates for the famous Baptistery: he was influenced by Domenico Veneziano and Donatello.

This record is important to us to-day when so many critics impale a young artist—triumphantly they try to show their little knowledge by crying "he is not original"—thereby only driving him to violent extremes and betraying their own great ignorance.

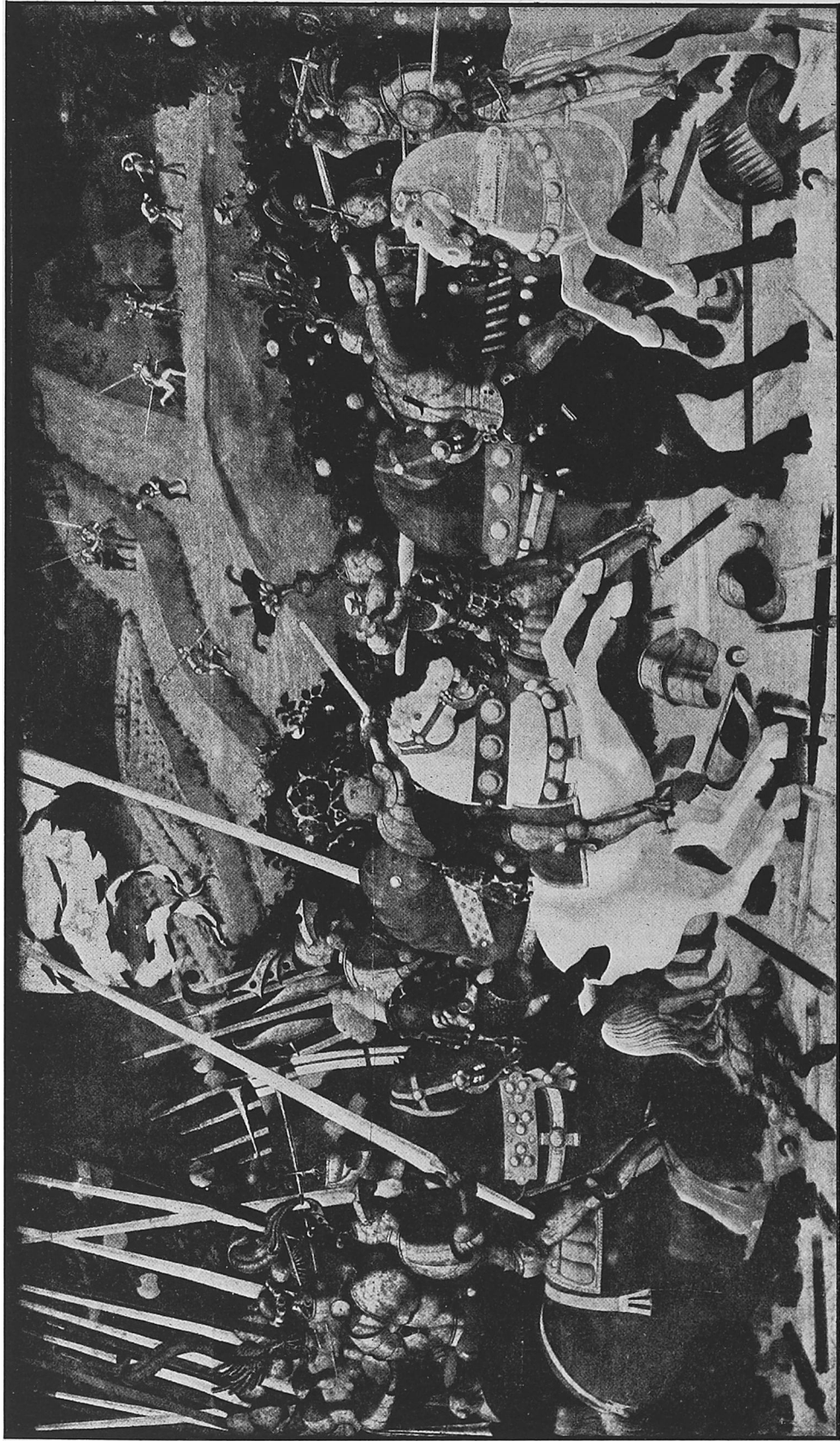
Uccello was a very busy painter but most of his work has perished. In the Louvre there is a beautiful panel which shows that, like all the decorators of tradition, he was a masterly portrait painter—knocking flat Clive Bell's silly belittling of portraiture. The work is of great historical interest for it shows Giotto, Donatello, Brunelleschi, Manetti and Uccello as the symbols of painting, sculpture, architecture, mathematics and perspective as the representatives of the beginning of modern art. A combination badly needed to-day, when a critic dares to run down a consummate artist on the grounds that "he is too intellectual!"

Paolo read geometry with Manetti and was so passionately devoted to his own discovery of perspective that he would stay up half the night working it out: indeed Vasari says he "wasted so much of his time that he became more needy than famous"—which is only another proof of how little some men can judge an artist. He was, however, better off than many a one-roomed struggler of Washington Square—for he lived in his own house, which he bought in 1434—before he was forty years of age—for a hundred florins.

He was a pioneer in the science of fore-shortening as we can see from the figure of the little dead knight, but his enthusiasm for these sciences for their own sakes never spoilt his love of pure decoration or his passion for exact realism. Nor was he less an artist for being also a scholar. He died in 1475.

Then as now "a score of men of genius and a thousand mediocrities egged each other on to exhibitions of dexterity" until the "entire public conclude that skill is genius and that skill is art."

*Amelia Dorothy Defries*



"THE ROUT OF SAN REMO, 1432"  
BY PAOLO DI DONO CALLED UCCELLO

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